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# Hollywood legacies and Russian laughter: *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto* / Pordenone Silent Film Festival 2014

Gert Jan Harkema

Over the past three decades *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*, or the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, has become an indispensable forum for academics, archivists, and collectors working on silent cinema. The festival is held in Pordenone, a small city in northern Italy, and is organised and curated by an international crowd of specialists in the field. For eight days in October the Teatro Verdi's large auditorium turns into a continuous screening space for new discoveries, rare findings, and early masterpieces.

As every year, the schedule is composed of several thematic programs. This year's 33<sup>rd</sup> edition in 2014 included thematic programs on Japanese cinema, Technicolor, 'The Barrymores', and 'Russian Laughter'. The Barrymores clustered the films of a family of actors: Lionel, Ethel, and John Barrymore. This broad and original collection successfully brought attention to some popular American movies that had been neglected. Similarly, the Russian Laughter section screened a collection of comedies from Russian early cinema, focusing on an easily overlooked yet popular tradition from the silent era. Both programs indicate the festival's ongoing ambition to expand film history narratives by providing a place where silent cinema in all its variety can be shown to an international audience

## Pordenone and academia

More than showcases for the public and commercial ventures, film festivals have been described as agenda-setting institutions for film producers, distributors, and public opinion.<sup>35</sup> These events are 'moments of self-celebration of a community', while at the same time the atmosphere of an 'unruliness of the carnival' makes festivals into occasions where new perspectives can be developed.<sup>36</sup> Ever since its earliest years *Le Giornate* has been closely aligned to academia and professionals. To borrow a metaphor from Thomas Elsaesser, the silent film festival in Pordenone breathes fresh air into the archives and early cinema studies.<sup>37</sup> Ideally, as Alex Marlow-Mann stresses, archival film festivals 'look to the future, reshaping

our view of film history with a view to influencing future accounts of the past, and potentially influencing new generations of filmmakers, not to mention embracing new technological developments to ensure that cinema's legacy continues into the future'.<sup>38</sup>

The influence of *Le Giornate* on academia can hardly be overestimated. The festival has been engaged in scholarly research through its publications, which include amongst others Charles Musser's extensive annotated filmography of the Edison's moving pictures before 1900, also the beautiful book on proto-cinema technologies *Light and Movement* by Laurent Mannoni, Donata Pesenti Campagnoni, and David Robinson. The festival's nonconformist programming may have also influenced research agendas. *Le Giornate* continues to look beyond the classics. The recurring section The Canon Revisited, for example, is not just a return to old favorites but also a critical reopening of the canon that suggests new titles. What characterises Pordenone is its inclusive stance toward the broad variety of entertainment that silent cinema was. As Paolo Cherchi Usai reflects, it screened 'everything that had survived – the good, the bad and the ugly'.<sup>39</sup> Also, the incorporation of non-Western national cinemas (for example Georgia in 2011, Ukraine and Mexico in 2013, and Japan in 2014) has broadened the horizon of many visitors, just as the festival's ongoing involvement with animation has been significant. In this way *Le Giornate* has become a place where silent cinema from all over the world is shown and where film historians and film archives share their knowledge.

Conversely, the influence of archivists and academics on the silent film festival is also evident. The festival publishes a 200-page catalogue in which film historians and archivists supply detailed accounts on the projected prints and their origins, as well as information on production, historical distribution, censorship, and a film's position within the director's or actor's oeuvre. The short articles in the catalogue emphasise how difficult it sometimes is to find a preserved copy of a film. It also highlights the problematic materiality of film and shows that individual prints differ significantly, especially after 100 years of conservation. The public seminar series 'Collegium Dialogues' that runs alongside the screenings allows young scholars and archivists to discuss these matters with the festival's programmers.

## The Barrymores

Consisting of 14 feature films and a collection of shorts, the Barrymore program was the largest theme during this festival edition. As a family of stage actors who in the 1910s extended their activities to the cinema screen they are quite well

known. John Barrymore (1882-1942) was one of the most popular actors of his time, both on screen as well as on stage. Similarly, his sister Ethel (1879-1959) gained fame on stage and made a brief but impressive move to silent film, where she became an early star of the screen. Their eldest brother Lionel (1878-1954), also an acclaimed theater actor, was the most productive family member in the film business with a career that stretched from the 1910s to the 1940s, including the role of Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). Over the years multiple biographies have been written on 'Hollywood's royal family', but to see the actual films of the individual siblings combined into one program allowed the viewer a chance to compare their careers in front of the camera.<sup>40</sup> In recent years *Le Giornate* included thematic programs on individual actors and actresses, such as Anna Sten and Anny Ondra. However, the number of family members each with their own distinguished career is what makes the Barrymores so fascinating. The sheer size of the program and the Barrymore family's position as American theater celebrities working in silent cinema made this section quite unique.

It was a real delight to see the elasticity and energy of John Barrymore's acting on a large screen in the spectacular feature *The Beloved Rogue* (Alan Crosland, 1927) and the romantic movie *When A Man Loves* (Crosland, 1927) – the latter played to a full house on the opening night. Ethel's subtle emotional acting featured in only four films but was equally impressive. Lionel's characteristic grumpy expression was present in the larger part of the films from the section, of which *The Copperhead* (Charles Maigne, 1920), about the Civil War, was possibly the finest. Despite its missing parts the feature *The Eternal City* (George Fitzmaurice, 1923) was particularly interesting, as the rediscovered film sympathises with the Fascist rise to power in Rome and includes a cameo from Mussolini himself.

Organised around a family of actors that was active in a broad range of films, the program on the Barrymores contains movies that would have otherwise remained unseen. Most of the features from the section are (not yet) part of the canon. As Philip Carli, the curator of the program, mentioned during a public seminar, some of the films screened at the festival have never been taken out of the archive vaults before, only because there seemed to be no particular reason to revisit them. Even though most are a pleasure to watch not all the movies from the Barrymore program can be considered remarkable or original. They do represent the economy of silent cinema, in which the vast production of popular and entertaining genre films made the audience return to the cinema multiple times per week.

According to the catalogue the goal for constructing the Barrymore program was 'to showcase their talent and to illustrate how important they are to film history'.<sup>41</sup> Seen as individual films, the family's role might appear limited. However, more than individual productions, the Barrymore clan represents the influ-

ence of theater on cinema as well as the institutionalisation of cinema with the arrival of celebrated actors. In this way the family signifies the path from stage to screen and the effect of stardom relocated from one medium to another. This makes us reconsider issues of intermediality and medium crossovers, from the early years of cinema into the studio system of the 1920s. In this respect, Charles Musser's plea for an 'integrated history of stage and screen' might be a valid argument to reconsider, as the program on the Barrymores suggests a system of reciprocal borrowing between the different media.<sup>42</sup>

## Russian Laughter

Whereas the Barrymore program was successful in opening up a new perspective on American silent cinema, this year's festival edition also brought the installment of a new annual series on Russian comedies. *Le Giornate* has a long and productive tradition of introducing less familiar parts of Russian silent cinema to international audiences. As early as 1989 the festival presented the program 'Silent Witnesses' that screened Tsarist cinema for the first time in the West, transferring these 'from legend to a startlingly sophisticated historical reality', while in the past decade the festival published a collection of Dziga Vertov's texts, edited by Yuri Tsivian, and a volume on Alexander Shiryayev compiled by Birgit Beumers, Victor Bocharov, and David Robinson.<sup>43</sup>

The program Russian Laughter can be seen as the newest element in the festival's ongoing effort of opening up parts of the rich Russian cinema tradition to non-specialist audiences. This year's edition presented all surviving silent comedies by Yakov Protazanov (1881-1945), a productive filmmaker who, after spending six years in exile in Berlin and Paris, returned to the Soviet Union in 1923 to become a major studio-based director.<sup>44</sup> Some of Protazanov's comedies were a real delight. *Zakroishchik iz Torzhka* (*The Tailor from Torzhok*, 1925), with the irresistible comic Igor Ilyinsky, elicited repeated laughter from the audience at Teatro Verdi. Even though this year's comedy program produced few rediscoveries the undertaking of collecting and showing them together was a valuable effort.

Both the Russian Laughter and the Barrymore program provide comprehensive insight into the many cultural forms that silent cinema included from the 1910s into the 1930s. Programming this 'light' entertainment works particularly well in relation to the epic, canonical films screened in the evenings, such as Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* (1924) and *Die Nibelungen: Kriemhilds Rache* (*Kriemhild's Revenge*, 1924), also the 1925 version of *Ben-Hur* (directed by Fred Niblo), which included impressive Technicolor scenes. Together, the programs signify the cine-

ma experience in a broader context, as an institute of everyday entertainment that needed a continuous flow of new productions consumed by millions of people.

## Rediscoveries

In his historical overview of archival film festivals Cherchi Usai paints a negative future for *Le Giornate* and other archival film festivals. He expresses a fear that due to rising commercial interests and digitisation, screening rare films and rediscoveries will become significantly more difficult.<sup>45</sup> For the time being, the 2014 edition of *Le Giornate* still proves otherwise. Both the Barrymore program and the Russian Laughter program were successful in bringing unexpected films into the limelight. Due to its broad selections the festival still manages to arouse new perspectives on otherwise well-known territories in film history.

Meanwhile, important rediscoveries of 'lost' films are still a central part of the event. In this respect *The Eternal City* (1923), as mentioned earlier, was one of the most original. Another that was as interesting and entertaining was *Das Frauenhaus von Rio* (1927). The director, Hans Steinhoff, is widely known for the films he made under the Nazi regime. Over the last few years at Pordenone there has been a reappraisal of Steinhoff's work as a silent cinema director, and *Das Fruenhaus* marks its most recent example. *Le Giornate* continues to be the place to present newly restored and rediscovered material. *Synthetic Sin* (William A. Seiter, 1929), for example, a 'flapper' film with a Vitaphone soundtrack starring Colleen Moore, was considered lost for a long time. A copy was found in Milan, along with the similar feature *Why Be Good* (Seiter, 1929). The restored version was enthusiastically received by the Pordenone audience.

Maybe the most surprising and unusual rediscovery came from the National Library in Oslo, where the Chinese production *Pan Si Dong* (*The Spider Cave*, Dan Duyu, 1927) was found. Considered lost for a long time, this adaptation of the novel *Journey to the West* is regarded by historians as decisive for Chinese film history. The film lived up to expectations by offering a well-known myth in a completely unfamiliar form and style. Even though these rediscovered films were missing some reels each one of them was able to surprise its audience. As a result, *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto* still provokes new insights as our collective understanding of silent cinema extends with every edition of the festival.

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## Notes

35. De Valck 2007.
36. Elsaesser 2013, p. 82.
37. Ibid., p. 85.
38. Marlow-Mann 2013, p. 10.
39. Cherchi Usai 2013, p. 28.
40. See Kotsillibas-Davis 1981, Peters 1990, and Stein Hoffman 2001.
41. Carli 2014, p. 36.
42. See Musser 2004.
43. Robinson 2013, p. 86.
44. <http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/jul05-christie.html> (accessed on 30 April 2015).
45. See Cherchi Usai 2013.

## About the author

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